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Black & White on White paper
46 pages

ISBN-13: 9780692563373
ISBN-10: 0692563377

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Marsiyah

Martyrdom of Imam Husayn

Aziz Talbani, Ph.D.

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Talbani, Aziz
Marsiyah: Martyrdom of Imam Husayn/ Aziz Talbani
p.cm.
ISBN-13: 978-0692563373
ISBN-10: 0692563377
1. Husayn ibn Ali 2. Islam 3. Karbala 4. Shi'ism 5. Spirituality
Marsiyah: Martyrdom of Imam Husayn
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Marsiyah

Martyrdom of Imam Husayn

I'm a clock, tick tock,
I'm time, existed before
Remain so, eons after

I'm the memory ─
People wish ─ they forget
Tyrants wish ─ they erase
Clerics attempt ─ appropriate

This one ─ memory, history, tragedy
Changed the nation

Exposed ─ yet hidden
Wrapped in faux history

Concealed in reconstituted narratives
Desires draped the creed
Greed swathed politics

You might have heard
Many times before
From countless storytellers
Diverse accounts

Never heard this one before
Truth is revealed, now
Tyrant led people astray

Tyrant ─
Silenced voices
Instilled fear
Violated bodies
Blunted minds
Numbed consciousness

Yet the amazing narrative
Survived persecutions, relentless ferocity

To be told

Every moment
Every day

Faction ─ devout
In their solitude
And in the *majlis*
Venerate the miracle
Live through blessed memories
Nurtured through raptures of souls
Sad convulsions of hearts
A moment in life
Stayed silently ─ edge of the desert
Turned into an eternal bliss
Owe such a moment to Husayn

Today I'll tell, what I saw
On the fateful day,
My inner eye witnessed
In the heart of desert
In the heat of the noon
Scorching sun
Couldn't keep count
Of what was lost
Scenes of bravery and majesty

Imam, the teacher, the guide, the mystic

Holy bodies ─ celestial souls
One, two, three,…
They're not numbers
Many into one ─
Cosmic souls ─ Encompass all
Bodies and souls
Symbols and meanings
Patient and persevering
And lingering hope for *Umma*

Time passed ─ reckoning begins
Who has the register ─
Who keeps records?
What was lost?
A story, a memory, faith or truth
Never found in books
Or consciousness of people

Truth lost, drop by drop ─ drip drop
When all was over
At the dusk, red horizon
Burning amber was the caravan

Martyrs heads carried on spears
Silhouettes of women and children
Marching at a distance ─
Heads uncovered, empty hands, bare feet
Surrounded by hapless soldiers ─
Without consciousness or
A shred of conscience
Flock of sheep ─ repeat tall tales
Pointing spears and swords
Still scared of power ─
Of women and children

Women's stories that live on
Not an ordinary family
Caliber unmatched
The family of Muhammad[sa]

The noblest of all, Mustafa[sa] wept
Had a vision ─
few decades after him
His family decimated
Allah had given signs
The holy book warned

It all began after the last Hajj
It wasn't an easy charge ─
Challenge greater than fighting infidels
Burden heftier than the year of sorrow

The Prophet ─
Allah's beloved *Rasul*
Most intimate friend
Didn't announce at Arafat

Yet Allah warned him ─
Mission is not done
The message must be delivered
"Allah will protect thee from people"
Who are the people?
Think ─ people?
Lend your ears
Open the window to your consciousness
I'll let you in on the secret ─
Some were present and others were yet to come

At Ghadir ─ another stop
Remember the meaning of faith

Presence of Allah in your life
Remember the hereafter
Never forget the Prophet's nobility
─ Intercessor and guide
In the world and hereafter
Manifest Truth
Among the believers
"One who saw me has witnessed the Truth"
The Prophet proclaimed
And extending it to Ali ─
Nearest to Allah and Mustafa
─ Is Murtaza
Now "Ali is
Lord over you"
The only link
To the meaning of faith
The only guide
To *Qiyamah*
Rasūl Allah proclaimed
"Ali ─ custodian of knowledge
The meaning of the book revealed
Through Ali and my progeny"

Walaya completed Islam

Concluded its last principle
Ali the source for *marifah*
Guidance to the truth
And *mushkil kusha*
His hand always extends
To you; in all times
The Prophet's mercy present
Through Ali
Left the Prophet ─ clear guidance
Thus Allah completed Islam

Yet many paths opened up
    Some believed in a state ─
    Others creed, doctrines, rituals
    Few and only few
    Followed the baraka and noor
Of Ali and his kin

Eventually ─
Monarchy took over
Nabi warned at Arafat
Avarice is Satan
Greed is stagnation
Don't let it take over ─

Your lives ─ losing bet
A perilous deal
Alas! Oblivious; paid no heed

Enlightened people of Safa
    Saw ominous signs
    Sobbed for times to come
With insight in
Ahmed's wisdom ─ knew
A new struggle is to begin
This time ─
    For the soul of Islam
    To preserve it, carry it
    and live it

Some sixty years after an-Nabi
The grandson Husayn ibn Ali
Brings the family with him ─
Was it a journey for the kingdom?
    Or wealth
    Or power
    Nay!

It was a unique journey

With the blessed family
No ordinary kin
Angels bow to them
Jinns follow their command
Dead and alive; people
Seek their mercy
When facing calamities
In life; hunger, disease, disaster
When taking the last breath
Facing inquisition in the grave
At the bridge to eternity
Stern moment in *Qiyamah*
    Fate to be decided
The family of the Prophet
Extends the mantle of grace

It was the journey taken by the Imam
    Awakened consciousness
    Enlightened mind; bearer of Noor
    Custodian of Prophet's wisdom
Revealing the path to be *abd*
Ahmed's intimacy with Ahad
The essence of *mi'raj*

Husayn now walks the track
    The path for all ─
Man, woman, and child
Husayn rides Zuljannah
    Buraq's earthly reflection
The caravan departs Mecca

Husayn waits for people to join
Few moments of silence
Bows his head in reflection
Remembers days he played with grandpa
Climbing on his shoulder during prayers
Sitting on his lap through sermons
Or hugs while playing in streets

Then Husayn raises his head, looks behind
No Meccan joined him
Fear blocked their path
Or greed hindered their way
Or lack of consciousness?

Takes a deep sigh
Recognizes ─ the time has not yet come
For them

To take the journey

The journey is of choice and love
Love and choice, not given
Nurtured in hearts and minds
The journey not an easy one
For those whose hearts have
Wisdom of Mustafa
Purity of purpose
Zikr of Almighty
It's a spiritual toil
Takes a lot
Total submission
Like the sacrificial lamb

The journey is a metaphor
For *mi'raj*
Fana in Allah
For mind ─
Enter the gate of knowledge
Emancipate from worldly delusions
Open to possibilities
To witness the signs
In the self, horizon and cosmos

Clean the heart ─
Without biases and prejudices
Fill with respect and kindness
Generosity and service
Soul ─
Recipient of bliss and noor

Husayn meditates; it may take generations
Centuries to unfold
The meaning of this journey
Truth sought by few
Not a majority/minority contest
Not an easy path
The caravan must go
Husayn nudges Zuljannah

On the way ─ Hurr stops
No passage to Kufa
Hurr out of water
Imam gives water
Soldiers and horses all
Hurr diverts them to Karbala
Barren desert, wilderness
Thousands more soldiers

surround them
harass them
Euphrates blocked
Desert heat reaches zenith
Man, woman, and child
Thirsty and famished

Abbas ibn Ali
With a water bag
Rides to Euphrates
His journey to eternity begins
Shower of arrows
Unsheathed swords
Receive him pointing spears
Undeterred by the offensive
He cuts through soldiers
Secures water
Fights back ─
Soldiers surround him
One arm is slashed ─ blood flows
Holds in the other arm
The other arm cut
Pain excruciating ─
Holds the water bag

In the mouth
Rushes to the camp
Body covered with arrows
Swords' wounds
Bravely endures pain
Mind focused on the Imam
Must reach the camp
Woman and child, old and young
Thirsty, thirsty, …
His parched lips ─ feel wet
Blood dripping from the head
Covers the face
Saddle soaked, ride drenched
He falls ─ eyes fixed on the camp
Pictures children, women, and sick
And his Imam
"Ya Mawla
I am sorry
Didn't bring water"

Hears his Imam's words
"Abbas ─ mercy on you
Go meet our beloved Prophet
And father and mother

They're witnessing
The unfolding
Of history's chapter"

The Prophet's family ─ without water
Alas, it wasn't just water
It exposed ─ people without compassion
People filled with hate and greed
People steeped in the oblivious
The *Umma* will remain thirsty ─
For eons to come ─
For grace and bliss
Only those'll receive
With knowledge from *ahl-al bayt*

Abbas looks up
Descending from heaven
Solemn troops of angels – Tears rolling
─ to receive Abbas
Silence prevails
Abbas in eternal peace
Departs with Imam's blessings

Like wolves and vultures

Rushing to their prey
Encircled
    Naked swords
    Pointing spears
    Showering arrows
Thousands
All toward the small ensemble
Family of the Prophet
and few companions

Nothing shakes consciousness
    Or rids the blind folds
    Or opens their hearts
Neither the holy lineage
Nor the sight of
    Women, children, and sick
Is the army ─ made of stone? or
    Clay from the bottom of hell
    Muck from the deep well of ignorance
    Smut from the recess of wickedness
    Or from the ocean of ignominy
Are they soldiers?
Or thugs preying on women, children and sick
Or mercenaries seeking loot

The Imam reflects ─
Looks at the encircling army
    Swords shimmering in sun
    Pointing spears shining at noon
    Drum beating with haunting sound

Imam goes to the tent
The last ditch effort
To shake up their conscience
Remove blindfolds ─ from their souls
Awaken their spirit
Show them the path

Brings Ali Asghar
A baby – thirsty, crying
A baby going through
    Trauma of war
    Subject to hate
    Suffering agony
Face flushed red in heat
Tiny arms wavering
As if praying to an intimate God
Or trying to hold the invisible hand

Or impatient to meet the divine

Imam raised Ali Asghar
“Oh people, look
He’s a baby
Whose water you blocked
A baby whose life you halt
    Do you know who Ali Asghar is?
    His tears will drown the ocean
    His cry is the bugle of Israfel
    and his sight is the vision of Gabriel
    Beware ─ don’t be led by greed
    For reward or power ─
    In his life
    is life hidden for you
    In his voice
    is consciousness for you
    Preserve him
    and you’ll live forever.”

People made of greed
Ignorance or hate; who knows?
What caused their blindness?
Or their motives

For this pathetic bet
Give up the eternal life;
For scraps of the world
Forsake the bliss of Prophet;
For the slavery of a tyrant

Heat, humidity, and swirling high sand jinn
Resounding war drums and
Swooshing arrows
Responding to Imam's counsel
With showers of arrows and spears
An arrow pierces ─Ali Asghar

The body ─ like a flower
Fragile as a glass
Like a glittering star
Light spreads through the lamp
As darkness overtakes
Desert noon

Now darkness casts over ─
The hearts and minds
What they believe or know
All futile, all in vain,

Ali Asghar is silent ─
His silence – penetrates the recess of
Heavens and earth
Pierces through the hearts of
Angels and jinns
Prophets and saints ─ bow their heads
In shame─ people could be so cruel
In grief ─ pain could be so deep

Imam holds the tiny body
In his arms ─ blood
Hands covered
Robe soaked
And Imam's heart…?

Desert – thirsty
Takes one more life
Blood recedes into sand
Karbala never seen such deep darkness ─ at noon
Darkness of minds and souls

Sorrow engulfs ─ Imam's heart
The people lost their way ─ So soon …

Forgetting favors the Prophet did ─
Brought them from darkness to light
Yet, all seems lost─

Returning to the age of ignorance
    Worshiping again idols
    Of Monarchy
    Dogma
    Material indulgence

The Imam returns to the tent
Prepares for the final bout─
Few go against thousands
It's not one battle ─ its multitudes
 Layers up layers
 Fought on many grounds
 Innumerable times
 At multiple levels
Of consciousness
 For the meaning of faith
 Purpose of *Din*

Those who deny Husayn now
 Their progenies will fight;

 For eons to redeem
Those who'll follow Husayn
 Their progeny exert to stay on the path;
 Face persecution, disapproval, condemnation
 Those who remain perplexed
 Will toil to take the journey

Husayn's journey remains the passage to truth
This journey
    Is not about numbers
    Or rational choice made for plunder
    Or saving earthly life
It is the battle where ─
    Wisdom goes against ignorance
    Noor against darkness
    Conscience against apathy
    Consciousness against oblivion
    Islam against monarchy
That's where Husayn stands

Hurr sees the evil side
Fighting against the truth
Bows his head in shame
He counsels with few and decides

Galloping to the Imam
Bows to him
“Ya Mawla, have mercy
My life and services
At your feet.”
Mawla blesses him
“Hurr go, receive eternal freedom”

Husayn’s loyal few
One by one ─ they fight
One by one
Comrades martyred ─
Witnessing the truth
Partaking heaven’s nectar
Quenching the thirst of lifetime
Escorting angels ─ envious of
Companionship they had with the Imam
Blessed life ─ revered death ─ sublime hereafter

Husayn ─ alone in the battlefield
Eerie silence prevails
Encircling army ─ ready
Shooting arrows
Aiming spears

Pointing swords

The moment has arrived
Divine light shines through Husayn
Apprehensive angels ─ encircle horizon
Awaiting Husayn to say the word
A curse, a condemnation, or a command
“We’ll turn that army to ashes ─
Their arms into melting liquid
Fear we’ll instill in their hearts
They’ll crawl into mothers’ bosom
Like Abrah’s soldiers
Ate the dust ─ those survived
Ran fast ─ to their shelters”

Husayn stays patient ─ lips utter prayers
Calamity facing, yet follows
Grandfather’s path ─ peace and forgiveness
The sky illuminates
Bliss descends on him

Husayn moves forward
The enemy retreats
Scared to fight ─ keeps the distance

Shooting arrows and throwing spears

A spear penetrates Imam's chest
Blood gushes
Wound is deep
Yet Husayn is calm
Bears the pain
Imam is serene
Fights back
Arrows and more arrows
Spears and more spears
Imam's holy body
Covered with wounds
Flowing blood
He fights – his body takes wounds
Uncounted
Blood covers saddle

Zuljannah sees the master's wounds ─ tears flow
Stomps the ground
with anger
with disgust
Wished he could squash low life
Dumb, deaf, and blind

Armies of ignorance
Worshiping mundane desires

The moment,
Husayn prostrates to offer
The last *sajda*,
Transcends all acts of worship;
All times to come
Husayn's sacrifice, the sublime
He is *abd*
As he closes to the ground
Distance diminishes between
Abd and *ma'bood*
Reaches the stage ─ where
Two become one

Shemr ─ the cursed one
Separates head from body
Sealing the fate of people
Live in oblivion
Die in ignorance
Grace doesn't touch their souls
Marcy enters not their hearts
Darkness spreads

Inside and out
They loot, burn and desecrate

The Prophet's family
Women brave and dignified
Stood firm
Bear the pain
Hold back their tears
Hide their grief
Stand up against tyranny

No submission to a tyrant
Silently walk the desert
The road to Damascus
City of sorrow,
Swallowed great empires
Waiting to nip another

Armies of scribes hired
Rewrite the history
Seize people's thoughts
Capture their souls' desires
Ignoble Judges sleep peacefully ─

Tomorrow to write another fiction ─ for a nefarious master
Elite enjoy wine and music in harem ─ celebrate

Vanquishing speaker of truth ─ darkness has spread
Hiding the true Master
Silence is imposed ─
Concealing the calamity of the martyrdom
People dreaming in their shacks ─ fed with illusions

Fictions of bygone glories
Buildings erected to cement fame
On people ─
Consciousness as if never dawned
Conscience, never nurtured
In people

The age of ignorance rises again
From the desert ─ with the sword of a tyrant
Darkness devoured the legend
of Husayn ─ they thought!

As sun rises the day after
Images disappear ─ the desert returns to cruel loneliness
An army of writers gather
To spin new stories
Theologian conjecture futile worldly problems
Starving laborers wander in bazaars to fill their bellies

Gangs of police walk through streets
Their specter ─ creates fear
    Presence of cataclysm
    Sense of impending disaster
    Violence and mistrust become the norm
    Humans reduced to ─
        Incarnates of animal instincts
Who's eavesdropping, who's spying,
Who's friend and who's a foe?

Tyrant paranoid, afraid,
So are the people
Society shapes sans
Trust, mercy, happiness
Refuge in delusions

The day after ─ new stories were woven
Conscience of a people silenced
Consciousness numbed
The family imprisoned

The battle was fought in a day
But truth was stolen behind veils
Meanings appropriated
By conspiracies in palace chambers
In corridors of seminaries
Behind closed doors of jurists

The thief came, took the meaning away
The battle for meaning and symbols
No one knew ─ fought
But who won, who lost
It wasn't for the throne and sword
It was for the healing of the soul
Of community

Alas! People comfortable in their slumber
Some watched through night vigils
How dark shadows pass through souls ─

Souls of heedless
The Prophet's words prevailed
"Islam grew in exile, will return to it"

New rules, altered beliefs, monarchy
Jahiliya wine in new bottles
Ulama write new creeds
Writers and artist ─ prosper ─ attending elites
Sword rules ─ tribal accounts
Some wonder what happened
That fateful day ─ when all changed
No one knew

The Story teller
Sits in a corner of the bazaar
Rubbing his head in anxiety
Exuberating confusion
Something is stolen from my stories
Meaning of words ─ changed
Words, symbols
He cries in silence
Holds back his tears
Police stand close by
Spies are in the crowd

Streets of Damascus, Mecca, Medina
And distant towns ─ bleeding hearts
Voices are exiled
Thoughts curtailed
Truth like air can't capture in a fist

Tyrant's religion ─ Obey the ruler
Follow his commands
Don't ask questions
Tyrant's religion
A new industry of violence
In many forms/shapes
Fear/punishment;
Mental/physical/spiritual
Conquests/destruction ─ dismemberment
People/places ─ cultures
Violence and fear here/hereafter
Tyrant's religion ─ hedonism
Harem/wine/pleasures
Tyrant's religion
Creates labels, new narratives, and noise
What could not be erased ─
Appropriate, change, modify ─ confuse

New language, new era
Heretics, infidels, separatists, foreigners
Loathe them, fear them, and destroy them
Is the recurring message
Registered in the consciousness of people
Destroyers of ancestral culture

A new narrative of fear
Mistrust, antagonism
We and they
Ours and theirs
Monopoly over truth ─ sword decides
Mobs run amuck ─ kill those who disagree
Kill those who love *Ahl al-Bayt*, or
Write, talk, or remember them

Thousands murdered, imprisoned, tortured
So they thought ─ annihilated Shia
Consciousness of people ─ diminished
So does the consciousness of nation
Ideas, thinkers, writers, philosophers
The secret that the Prophet told
That tongue is silenced

So they thought!

Voices of wisdom
Secrets awaken in the soul
Mantle of grace remains
Husayn's wounds ─ a community's wounds
A community evolves with unhealed wounds
Tensions and scars remain

The Community
Never realizing what was lost
What was stolen?
Never recognizing who were thieves
A drunken, corrupt tyrant wasn't alone
Often the power of fiction
Hides more than that it reveals
Truth is covered in thousand veils

Those who insist ─ let swords decide, unaware
Our Lord Husayn's martyrdom
Sign of end times; coming
Beginning of the end

Petty tyrants, swarm like reptiles;

Besiege the sacred, holy in life
On the hallow grounds of truth

Violated by the muck, people covered in
Shining robes, gold in fingers and necks
Ran amok goons of devil
    Armies of tyrant
In so many guises ─ men of faith
Scholars, merchant in bazaar,
Jesters in street, or writers
They march through our consciousness
Penetrate in our minds
With fib they torment our souls
Put us on the path of confusion

Is the Prophet's mantle gone?
Is meaning lost forever?
Faith just regurgitation, routine or
 Numbing repetition

Fairytale history ─ replaced wisdom of the family
Gloom of dark souls ─ ousted the joy of spirits
Hatred/distrust ─
Violence of uncontrolled anger ─ prevails

Confusion and despondency
Who would know?

Tyranny of power destroys itself
Rendering mayhem
    starving minds and souls
Pulpits, preachers, penchants
Diatribe ─ men's words envelope God's
Rulers' service blends with God's
Follow the wealthy/powerful
Rulers serve pitcher/goblet
Song/music/devious words
Time lost in drinks
Company of dancers, jesters, sycophants
What do they know?
Game in the world ─ zero sum
Gained nothing, preserved nothing

Journey of a soul in the dark
From darkness to darkness
From absurdity of man-made beliefs
    to loneliness of eternally damned
Tyranny drives strength from division
    Legitimacy from violence

Its sustenance ─ from sycophants

Vicious circles of events
Counting bodies each day
And beginning again the next
Insolent to
    Tears and fears of a mother,
    Sigh of a father
    Sobbing of brothers/sisters/bride

History of the followers of tyranny
    Believe without certitude
    Know nothing
    Explore none
    Delusions in mind
    Doubts in heart
    Darken their world
    Rituals, routines, dogma

Their destiny
    Live in anger
    Die in despair
Without knowing
    What the Prophet brought?

Why Husayn shed his blood?
Why their conscience silent?
Why their consciousness in the dark?
Why they lost the path?
Why they adhere to tyrants?

Reverberate memories of women/children
Disappearing in the desert sunset
Husayn's blood absorbed in desert sand
Emerges from the dunes
Perfumes the ether of life

From Husayn's heart to
The core of humanity's soul
In distance places ─ thought ferments
Who knew?
Where voices and promises of victims' silences
 Blossom, a new language
Words, meanings, the Prophet's grace
Remained through Husayn's blood
Who knew?

When the sounds of battle drums stopped
In exile ─ new stories are told

Struggle begin anew
A fraction comes out from shadows
Kindle the love of Husayn
Spread the wisdom of *Ahl al-Bayt*

A doctor's clinic
A bookseller's library
A sufi's cloister
Books exchanged stealthily
Messages delivered covertly
All in silence, hidden, preserving meaning
Meeting in secret for wisdom and science
But for the few

Centuries after centuries
The Prophet's promise fulfilled
Light upon light,
In hearts, minds, and verily
Through words, pens, and brushes

Light embraces
In despair, in struggle, poverty
In riches too
A ray of light shines

Engulfs
Guides
Holds your hand
Always, always keeps you
Closer to the source
Prophet said
"Islam grew in exile, will return to it"

Oh Lord Husayn, I submit to thee
Rescue us from fables of unholy
Free myself, free my mind, my soul
Yazids of the time though powerful
Your bliss, a drop of it, enough
To heal the wounded soul
Relieve the pain
And shatter the darkness
Let vanish
Long cast shadow of doubt
Reclaim the mantle of protection
Please protect ─ what's sacred in us
Relieve us from pain,
invisible and unspoken
Protect the bosom custodian of thy story
The miracle that's Husayn's story

The story of truth and love

Husayn left, never gone
His light shines
At mid-night vigils
Early morning zikr
Day time toil
Discerning Zulfiqar ─ shreds ignorance
Zuljannah swift through life ─ discovering
    Open thy mind,
    Window to thy spirit
What you need in life
You'll have it
Let open your heart and
Light of Husayn brings eternal peace
Right now ─ right here
Open the door,
Or a window
Or even a key hole to your soul
His light will cover your
Existence ─ give yourself a chance
No one returns empty handed
    from the threshold of Mustafa
His touch transforms

    Revives the dead
    Give riches beyond imagination
Husayn's voice echoes
In consciousness of mine
Sleep walk through life
The death you escape has occurred
The battle you fight against tyranny
Awakens thyself with nightly vigils
Wraps around with love a lonely heart

That evening, travelers
Stranded in a desert
Burning tents, sobbing kids
A deep wound in memory
The memory of martyrs
When in his *majlis*
In your tears
Aches in your hearts
Rest assured ─ Husayn is present
Hold him ─ in your arms
Hold him ─ in your eyes
Hold him ─ in your heart
And from your consciousness
Never, ever let the Iman go…

The Author

Dr. Aziz Talbani was awarded PhD and MA degrees from McGill University, MA from the University of London, and MA from Karachi University. He has taught and spoken at Institutions of Higher Education in North America, Europe, and Asia. As a faculty member, he taught in Educational Leadership and Teacher Education programs. His primary specialization is in areas of diversity and cultural competency. Through the decades, Aziz has mentored many students in diverse fields including Education and Religious Studies. He notes, “My most rewarding experiences come from working with communities in various parts of the world on social justice and equity issues, educational development, and women’s rights.” As a writer and artist, his current focus is on fiction writing including novels, short stories, and poetry.

Forthcoming Books:

Muhammad^{sa} *in Ismaili Gnosis: History, Philosophy, and Spirituality,* 2016.

Source Book on Diversity: Post-Modern Analysis, 2016.

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